

Rocky Mountain

Administrative History



CHAPTER XIII: THE PARK RANGERS

There have been scattered references in the preceding chapters to activities of Park rangers, a group which composed the membership of what came to be called the Protection Department of Rocky Mountain National Park. But their duties, experiences and accomplishments merit supplementary and separate description. Initially, three rangers were enrolled on the Park staff, but by 1966 the number had grown to fourteen. The need for this increase stemmed from the heavy demands placed on the rangers in fulfilling the Park's objectives, particularly as the number of visitors steadily grew. The scope of the ranger's assignment has been broadly summarized by Superintendent Edmund Rogers, when in 1933 he reported on the duties of the Protection Department:

This department is charged with the protection of the Park's forests from fire, insects and trespassing; guidance, control and protection of the Park's visitors' maintenance and rationing of the shelter cabins; care and maintenance of public camp grounds; the keeping of detailed travel records and pertinent related data thereto; protection and control of the Park's wild life; preliminary maintenance of trails; and maintenance of the Park's telephone lines during the winter months as well as many other miscellaneous details during winter months and times of emergency. [1]

Not all of these duties had emerged when the Park opened in 1915, but there was plenty of work for the first three rangers, namely R. T. "Dixie" MacCracken, Frank Koenig and Reed Higby. Superintendent L. C. Way later recalled that in the early days: "The few rangers worked like slaves building camps and enforcing park regulations." [2] They also were occupied with a multiplicity of other tasks. For example, in September 1915 rangers MacCracken, Koenig, and Higby fought the Park's first forest fire. That same month they stocked Lake Odessa, Fern Lake, and Two River Lake with trout. In fact, during the first year, rangers placed a total of 165,000 trout in Park lakes. [3] In cooperation with the State Game and Fish Department and the United States Bureau of Fisheries, rangers have maintained a systematic annual fish stocking program. By 1965, an estimated eleven tons of fish tempted the fisherman in the Park's streams and lakes.

In 1917, rangers strung eighteen miles of metallic circuit telephone line from Mill Creek Ranger Station to Grand Lake, thus giving communication between the District Ranger and Supervisor's office. This work was accomplished mostly on snowshoes and skis during the winter months. Winter work was hard even for the roughhewn rangers. Ranger Fred Michel

suffered two frozen toes trying to drive by car from Estes Park to Grand Lake to relieve MacCracken. He succeeded in reaching the Lake only on his fourth try. [4] That same year rangers built their own ranger stations, their chief ranger's residence, and the home of the Park superintendent. The phrase "constructed with all ranger labor" became a familiar one in the Park's Annual and Monthly Reports.

Incidentally, there was marked individualism, as well as occasional instances of irresponsibility among the early rangers. In 1917, MacCracken balked at being assigned to the Grand Lake ranger district, and decided to enlist in the Army instead. Koenig allowed cattle to run on Park lands, and spent much of his time "gathering medicinal herbs, butterflies, moths, beetles . . . and minerals for profit." [5] As a consequence, he was dismissed from the staff. In 1922, Ranger Fred Grange disappeared from his station at Poudre Lakes, having purloined a pay check from a member of the road crew. [6] He was last seen going due east on the Grand Lake-to-Denver stage.

In addition to the variety of tasks that have been described, the rangers also faced bizarre experiences—oftentimes connected with the mountain range which formed the spine of the National Park. The rangers climbed these mountains both for pleasure and to rescue sportsmen whose ambition overreached their ability. Dominating the range, as previously mentioned, is Longs Peak, 14,255 feet in elevation. The first authenticated ascent to its summit was made on August 23, 1868 by Major John Wesley Powell. Powell's party, which climbed the mountain from the south side, was probably not the first group of people to stand atop this mountain, for legends suggest that the Arapahoe Indians maintained an eagle trap on the summit, and therefore may have visited it frequently.

A later climber, ranger Jack Moomaw, made one of the first winter ascents of Longs Peak, on January 9, 1922, using the same route as Powell. Moomaw did it for no official reason, for he explained:

It was a clear day, one could see every gulch and cliff and the Peak stood out like a gigantic etching. A sudden desire came over me to be up there; it seemed a challenge that could not be ignored. [7]

During the following fall, Moomaw again scaled the Peak, but this time neither alone nor by the relatively safe south face. He accompanied James W. Alexander, Mathematics Professor of Princeton University, up the precipitous and dangerous east face. Two days before, Alexander had made the first ascent by that route. Moomaw added spice to the careful but uneventful climb by taking pictures of the ascent with a Kodak camera. As memorable an occasion as this must have been for Moomaw, he later took part in an ascent more significant—the futile attempt to save the life of Agnes Vaille.

Early on the afternoon of Monday, January 12, 1925, Chief Ranger Thomas J. Allen, Jr., phoned Moomaw at his residence to hurry to the Longs Peak Inn, for trouble had been reported on Longs Peak; Moomaw, Allen, and another ranger were going to have to investigate it. At the Inn, the rangers were told the basic facts of a tragedy. On the previous Saturday, January 10, Agnes W. Vaille, Elinor Eppich and Walter Kiener, all Colorado

Mountain Club members, had started up the Longs Peak trail toward Timberline Cabin, with the intention of climbing the east side of the Peak. [8] Subsequently the weather became threatening, so by early Sunday morning the three considered giving up their attempt to continue any further. Then by 9:30 a.m. weather conditions had improved and Miss Vaille and Kiener decided to proceed, but Miss Eppich returned to Longs Peak Inn. It might be noted that no one had yet succeed in ascending the east side during winter time.

The two climbers made good progress, but when darkness came that Sunday, Miss Vaille and Kiener were still a considerable distance from the top. They agreed, however, that it would be more hazardous for them to retrace their steps than to complete their climb, so they continued upward. During the night the temperature dropped to 14 degrees below zero and a strong west wind began to blow, yet they reached the summit at 4:00 a.m. Monday, January 12.

Because of the intense cold and their own fatigue, they decided to descend the north side of the Peak, direct to the Boulderfield, a shorter but more dangerous route. While on the most difficult part of the north side trail, Agnes Vaille fell and slid about 150 feet down the steep face of the rock. She was stopped only by the rocks at the lower edge of the snow. Kiener quickly reached her, but was unable to help her make substantial progress. After an hour's wait Kiener decided to start down for help. Miss Vaille believed that if she could get a half an hour's sleep she could resume the trip and meet Kiener on his return. In the preceding fifty hours they had slept less than an hour. [9]

Meanwhile a party of local residents, men, composed of Jack Christen, Hugh Brown, Oscar Brown and Herbert Sortland, formed a rescue party and started up the peak. When this party did not return on Monday the rangers were called into the search. Upon reaching Timberline Cabin, the three rangers found Kiener, Hugh Brown and Christen huddled about the stove; Oscar Brown and Sortland had earlier been forced to turn back. The rangers were told that about 4:00 or 4:30 p.m., Brown, Cristen and nearly exhausted Kiener had reached Miss Vaille. They found her body lying face down on a rock, a few feet from where Kiener had left her. She probably had been dead for several hours. Unable to bring her down the mountain, the men returned to Timberline Cabin about 7:30 p.m. where Moomaw and the rangers found them. [10] After spending a sleepless night at the Cabin, the entire party went back to the Longs Peak Inn to wait for favorable weather before retrieving Miss Vaille's body. While at the Inn, they learned that Herbert Sortland had not yet returned.

Not until a week later did the weather clear, and a party of eleven men, including every available National Park Service man, was led by Superintendent Toll back up the mountain. They made a make shift stretcher out of skis and carried out the dead climber. More than a month later (February 25) Sortland's body was found on the edge of a frozen swamp a short distance south and east of Longs Peak Inn. After the Vaille tragedy, and perhaps because of it, rangers extended the Park's telephone line from the Hewes-Kirkwood Inn, 6-1/2 miles below the Boulderfield, to Timberline Cabin. From this shelter the line was extended to the new terminus of the Longs Peak trail at the center of the Boulderfield. [11]

Later, in August 1925, Ranger Moomaw and two workmen, Glen Walker and Harry

Simpson, installed a steel cable on the north side of Long's Peak, along the route that Miss Vaille and Kiener had begun to descend. This route from the Boulderfield to the summit was not considered a difficult climb, but was seldom used because about 200 feet of it were steep, and dangerous in freezing weather. Two sections of the cable were placed along the trail, one 160 feet in length, and the other at a higher point, 31 feet in length. The cable was fastened to the steeply sloping face of the mountain by strong pins firmly imbedded in granite. The galvanized cable had been manufactured to sustain a load of five tons. [12]

Since then climbers could use the cable on the north face for the ascent and then descend by the south face, which was marked by small red and yellow disks in the summer of 1922. [13] Rangers and workmen also constructed, in 1925, a masonry shelter cabin and a masonry horse shelter in the Boulderfield. Furthermore, through a donation from F. P. Vaille, they constructed an igloo-shaped storm shelter, with walls and roof of stone, above the Boulderfield. At an elevation of 13,200 feet, this shelter was located higher than any building in all the National Parks.

Because the Boulderfield is reached only by means of a horse trail from the Hewes-Kirkwood Inn, the building of the shelters presented unusual difficulties. All of the cement and lumber materials had to be packed in on burros and horses over a trail which rises 3,000 feet in elevation. Sand, for mixing with the cement, was carried from a sand bed below timberline and the poles used for the window spans and rafters were hauled a distance of 4-1/2 miles. [14]

With no trail of any kind beyond the Boulderfield shelter cabin, the materials for erecting the Vaille memorial had to be carried in by hand. Seven trips a day were made by each worker between the shelter cabin and the memorial. On each trip, each man carried from 40 to 50 pounds of sand and cement. Work on the memorial had to be suspended in 1926 because of severe weather, so construction was not completed until the fall of 1927, when the last workman had to leave the Boulderfield in a snowstorm. Ranger Moomaw later declared that the work ". . . was hell. Horses came in nearly every day covered with ice." [15]

About thirteen years after the Vaille tragedy, another misfortune occurred, not directly associated with mountain climbing, but with the wandering of a small boy. It prompted one of the most intensive mountain searches ever undertaken in Colorado—and as might be expected, Ranger Moomaw was in the thick of it. The tragedy developed out of the fact that in 1938, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Beilhartz of Denver, with their 4-1/2 year old son, Alfred, were spending the Fourth of July holiday in the Park. The family had established a weekend camp about a quarter of a mile west of Fall River Lodge in the rough, timbered country north of Trail Ridge Road. [16] Upon arising on the morning of July 3, the boy's father went to a nearby stream to wash and the boy set out with him. Oran Bronson and Walter Hansen, both members of the Beilhartz party, also went to wash about 500 feet further up stream. Alfred followed them. When the two men returned to camp, they noticed that Alfred was missing, and an immediate search was started. The search proved unavailing and calls went unanswered, so the family contacted Ranger Moomaw at the Fall River Ranger Station.

Moomaw immediately enlisted the aid of the Civilian Conservation Corps and a search began under the leadership of Chief Ranger Barton Herschler. More than 100 members of the CCC participated. W. C. Hilgedick, chief radio engineer for the National Park Service, who happened to be in the Park, directed the rapid establishment of contact between search parties by means of shortwave radio. [17] Bloodhounds from the Colorado State Penitentiary entered into the search on July 4. On July 5 the Roaring River was diverted and every inch of the river bed was scoured to the junction with pikes and grappling hooks, as were the woods and brush for ten miles around the camp from which the boy wandered. By July 11 only twelve of the original 100 CCC boys were kept on the search, since no trace of the boy's body could be found. The next day Cascade Dam, two miles below the confluence of the Roaring and Fall Rivers, was drained, but to no avail. [18]

"G-Men" entered the case when a threat of kidnapping was seriously considered. A Denver couple reported seeing a boy answering the missing youngster's description sitting on a boulder in the Devil's Nest region near where young Beilhartz disappeared. In November 1938, the parents received a hoax ransom note, again hinting at the possibility of kidnapping because the boy was said to be still alive. But the investigation of the note likewise proved fruitless and it was generally concluded that the boy perished in the Park, probably by drowning in Fall River or one of its tributaries. [19]

Ranger Moomaw tried an experiment which pointed up the hopelessness of ever finding the boy, if he had fallen into the water. Moomaw later recalled that

one morning before the crews arrived, I filled a gunny-sack with rags and enough stones to give it about the weight of a small body and tossed it into the stream where the boy was last seen. I had to run fast to keep it in sight until it reached Fall River, and there it promptly disappeared under an overhanging bank. I had some boys work that section for days, but they found nothing, not even the sack. [20]

The great majority of the Rangers' time has been spent in more prosaic but essential tasks. One of their major duties was enforcing Park regulations, and violators have been numerous. In carrying out such duties the rangers have cooperated with a United States Park Commissioner since 1931. Under the Act of Congress approved March 2, 1929, accepting jurisdiction over the lands embraced in the National Park, police powers were assumed by the Federal Government in April 1931. A U. S. Commissioner was empowered to enforce federal regulations. Rangers apprehended people for such violations as drunk and disorderly conduct, speeding, reckless driving, possession of fire arms, illegal fishing, petty larceny, defacing government property, disturbance, trespassing, cutting trees, poaching, and carrying passengers for hire without a permit. The Park's permanent staff of rangers has been assisted by seasonal, temporary rangers through the years. This seasonal crew has functioned as trail patrolmen, campground caretakers, motor patrolmen, and traffic checkers at entrance stations.

Rangers have not only had the task of protecting the travelers to the Park but also protecting the Park itself. While forestry work and forest control methods have changed over the years,

forest protection problems have not changed much. In 1915 the Park's fire fighting equipment fell under the general heading "necessary paraphernalia [sic] for fighting forest fires," and it was placed in six tool boxes strategically located throughout the Park. [21] To reach fires, rangers depended on Rocky Mountain Transportation Company touring cars. In the 1930's the Park acquired radio equipment, to aid in locating fires. Moreover, fire lookouts were established at Twin Sisters, Shadow Mountain, the North Fork of the Thompson River, and near Longs Peak. Since 1915, Park Service and Forest Service rangers have cooperated in fighting fires in their various jurisdictions. By the 1960's forest fire specialists utilized teletype information and aircraft to assist in fire detection.

Rangers have also been required to deal with forest tree diseases and insect pests, which often take a greater toll of trees than do fires. One of the most persistent pests has been the Black Hills Beetle, so named because it was first identified in the Black Hills National Forest. This pest was first found in the Estes Park region about the year 1908. It attacks all pine trees, but is only successful in weakened ones which lack free-flowing pitch. Two hundred and fifty beetles can kill a tree. They enter through the bark and work upward and around, laying their eggs and eating away the inner layer of bark till the tree is entirely girdled. The beetles thereby cut off the tree's source of nourishment and it dies. The female beetle is about as large around as a common wooden match and is 1/4 inch in length. [22]

In March 1922 the beetle made its appearance just below Horseshoe Park, four miles northwest of Estes Park Village, when 12 trees were found to be infected. By 1927 an attack of Black Hills Beetles on ponderosa pine became an epidemic. There were about 28 square miles of yellow pine forest in the National Park. Chief Ranger John C. Preston and Ranger Walter Finn investigated about 20 square miles and reported that the number of infected trees ranged from 700 to 10,000 per square mile. By 1930, after intensive effort by the rangers, the infestation was considered to be at a "harmless minimum." Later in the 1930's CCC crews under the supervision of the District Rangers, helped bring beetle infestations under control. Rangers of both the Park Service and Forest Service cooperated in this work.

After World War II, the Park rangers encountered another serious threat to one particular species of tree, the Limber Pine, in the form of White Pine Blister Rust. In 1950, an annual blister rust control program was begun. By 1965, there were approximately 10,000 acres of Limber Pine protected from this disease by removal of currant and gooseberry bushes. Meanwhile, rangers were assigned to aid in the work of soil and moisture conservation, each of which became a growing field of interest. Data was collected by rangers on snow depths and water contents of the Park's ten snow courses for the benefit of irrigationists, industrialists, and reservoir managers. The rangers also helped foresters return eroded trails and areas of damaged vegetation to their natural condition. [23]

In summary, Park rangers have carried out a potpourri of responsibilities. They have shot elk, fought fires, killed insects, cleared snow, built ski trails, apprehended law-breakers, spied on rent-car drivers, rescued travelers, recovered bodies of persons who could not be rescued, measured snow depths, drawn maps, stocked fish, led CCC workers, and answered visitors' questions. In large measure, the Ranger was the Park Service's utility man—he was all things to all people and he was expected to be at all places at all times. He could be

found behind a desk or behind the scenery. Some served only briefly, but one, Fred McLaren, served 37 years and gave three sons to the Park Service as rangers. Veteran or neophyte, each ranger has made a contribution during his term of service. Chief Ranger John McLaughlin reflected the mood of many rangers when he said: "These were exciting days, vibrant with possibilities and opportunity. It was good to be a part of the times . . ."

[24]

ENDNOTES

1. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1933, "Annual Reports, 1931-1953," p. 7. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.
2. The Denver Post, June 28, 1931.
3. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1915, "Annual Reports, 1915-1930," p. 16. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.
4. Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1918, "Monthly Reports, 1915-1918," p. 4. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.
5. Ibid., November 1918, p. 3.
6. Ibid., August 1922, p. 7.
7. Jack C. Moomaw, Recollections of a Rocky Mountain Ranger (Longmont, Colorado), p. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 34.
9. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1925, "Annual Reports, 1915-1930," p. 17. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.
10. Ibid.
11. Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1925, "Monthly Reports, 1924-1926," p. 7. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.
12. Ibid., August 1925, pp. 7-8.
13. Ibid., August 1922, pp. 9-10.
14. Rocky Mountain News, May 27, 1928.

15. Ibid.

16. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1939, "Annual Reports, 1931-1953," p. 19. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.

17. Ibid.

18. Moomaw, Recollections of a Rocky Mountain Ranger, p. 92.

19. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1939, "Annual Reports, 1931-1953," p.. 19. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.

20. Moomaw, Recollections of a Rocky Mountain Ranger, p. 93.

21. Superintendent's Annual Report, 1915, "Annual Reports, 1915-1930," p. 19. Rocky Mountain National Park Library.

22. Estes Park Trail, December 30, 1921.

23. Robert K. Weldon, "Even with better tools, Forest Protection and Tree Health is a never-ending campaign in RMNP," Estes Park Trail "Vacation Edition," March 1965.

24. John S. McLaughlin, "Rocky Mountain — A Look Back, Look Ahead," *ibid.*